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Auditing and Managing Community Service in a Higher Education Institution

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Abstract

It is common practice for universities across the globe to engage in some form of benevolent interaction with communities beyond the borders of their campuses. Current legislative transformation in higher education in South Africa, for example, urges higher education institutions to become more responsive to civil society through projects that are beneficial to communities. The premise of this paper is that such responsiveness requires the efficient management of the institutional community service output. This necessitates a sound information system about the community service activities in an institution. The decentralized managerial nature of faculties and institutes of a university can make this management a daunting task.

This paper investigates the complexities and importance of recording community services in a higher education institution to facilitate efficient management. It explores possible measurable elements and reports on the findings of a recent audit of the community service activities done at the Stellenbosch University.

Context

The majority of universities across the globe have some form of interaction with communities outside the borders of their campuses. Most universities reflect a specific mission in applying their expertise to benefit the community by improving social circumstances or quality of life in civil society *(Maurrasse 2001: 6; Kellogg 2002, 73)*. This is generally referred to as community service, but in some cases as community outreach, community participation, community partnerships, or community interaction. Because universities are learning institutions, teaching and research constitute their core business and raises the question of why they engage in community service. The evolution of this phenomenon reflects various driving forces that include altruism, practical experience for students, and political pressure *(Wedgewood 2003, 127; Maurasse 2001, 17)*. In South Africa, a developing country, the government is struggling to create peace in a diverse society recovering from the legacy of

apartheid and is applying increasing pressure on higher education institutions to help build the new democracy. In other countries, community engagement takes a variety of forms, but the ultimate goal is to promote a higher order of learning and knowledge creation, multiple learning sites offering to students and emancipating opportunities to communities *(Kellogg 2002, 73)*.

Mission statements of universities are often open to interpretation by their departments and institutes. Maurrasse argues that complex organizations can function successfully with numerous uncoordinated activities and collective agreement is not a prerequisite to efficiency, but for communities this is problematic. "The lack of cohesion within institutions of higher education may be generally understood by those within academia; however, when partnering externally, this lack of cohesion can create confusion" *(Maurrasse 2001, 7)*. This often results in duplication of services in one sector of the community and lack of services where they are most needed.

The management of community service engagement is the focus of this paper. The increased efficiency in service rendering of any community service process has the ultimate goal of serving the interest and contributing to the wellness of the target community. This paper promotes the notion that communities will benefit from this engagement only if activities are organized in a coordinated manner. Centralized and cumulative recording of the community service outputs is advocated as a second-level recording method that can be utilized by universities to manage community engagement. Recorded information will inform equitable distribution of resources, contribute to the development of multifaceted learning sites, and illuminate visibility of both internal and external outputs. Recording opens the possibilities of measuring the success of services and is further explored.

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In this paper events at the Stellenbosch University, South Africa, are used to exemplify a process where the top management of the institution experienced increasing pressure to manage

the community service output of their constituency efficiently. The greatest impediment to this end was the lack of reliable information on community service activities. A tool was developed to collect and process the data on these activities. A report is given of the process followed to collect the information and the subsequent findings. The current legislative transformation in higher education in South Africa, urging higher education institutions to become more responsive, is the context in which the arguments are formulated.

Community Service in Higher Education

Historically higher education institutions interact with communities to access and recruit their primary clients, namely students, and to offer their students the opportunity to gain practical experience in their field of study. Higher education institutions are often criticized as being "elitist," choosing to meet the human resources demand of the academic fraternity than to prepare students to be responsible citizens in society. During the last two decades, higher education systems globally have been increasingly challenged to become more responsive to society's needs. The response of higher education institutions to this disquiet call is varied. The most common model of community service is based on voluntarism that is housed in individual and often isolated structures within institutions *(Stoecker 2003, 42)*. The other growing form of community service is to integrate it into the curriculum in different forms and on different levels. The forms in which community service can evolve are internships, field education, experiential learning, and service-learning. In the United States, service-learning has culminated into Campus Compact, a national coalition of close to 850 college and university presidents, whose mission statement states that it promotes community service that develops students' citizenship skills and values, encourages partnerships between campuses and communities, and assists faculty who seek to integrate public and community engagement into their teaching and research *(Campus Compact 2001)*.

In South Africa, the transformation of higher education saw the passing of legislation to align institutions to actively participate in "the redress of past inequalities and the transformation of the system to serve a new social order" *(RSA 1997, 1)*. It includes the response of higher education to the development needs of society. The government expects measurable dividends on its investment in higher education, which targets both the underdeveloped domestic

social order and the area of economic development and global competitiveness *(Perold and Omar 1997, 27).*

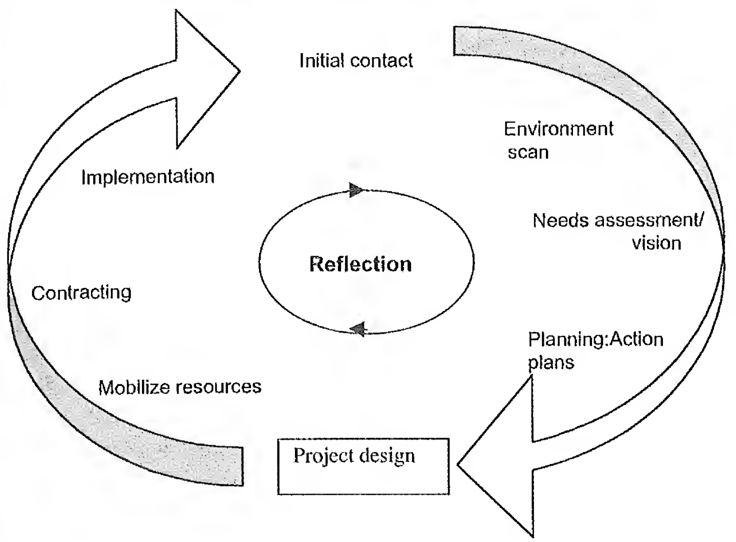
In response to governmental directives, many South African higher education institutions embarked on strategic planning exercises to revisit their community service involvement. In 2000, with reference to my own work, it was found that the mission statement of most South African universities and colleges contained community service as one of their core functions. Further investigation revealed that few of the institutions had a policy specifically for community service, and they did not necessarily see a relation between their engagement with communities and systemic change in conducting their core business. Although some of the institutions with policies in place reflected the development of citizenship goals, community service was perceived as an activity on the periphery of daily business and in some cases an add-on to learning and research. Community service at the majority of institutions is largely done by individual initiatives that function autonomously. The information about their activities and experiences remains confined to the people who are directly involved in community endeavors *(Smith-Tolken 2000)*. My conclusion is that this isolation perpetuates the invisibility of their projects and restrains the potential for shared experiences and multidisciplinary learning sites.

Recording Community Service

Recording in community service is generally understood as writing down information about what is intended with the process and following through by recording progress as it happens. When a university engages in a community development process as a service provider, communities are guided to determine where they are and where they want to go. The gap between these two points is filled with a process that will get them to move from the one point to the other. In each of the phases, some form of recording should take place. Research on community processes showed a specific sequence of phases that is depicted in Graph 1.

In this graph it is suggested that the process has a specific beginning point where community and service provider meet. This initial contact might be initiated from either (in this instance) the university or an individual or group from the community. Contacts generally take place in the form of meetings or discussions that result in minutes or notes. The environment scan

GRAPH 1: COMMUNITY SERVICE PROCESS



constitutes a depiction of where the community is, and a needs assessment can culminate in a vision or mission statement that indicates where the process is heading. Again, the data will be lost if not recorded systematically in some report format. The planning process normally includes an audit of resources and a contracting between the community and service provider. The content of these activities can be documented into a project design or project proposal. Recorded documents ensure continuity and are often recurrently used to reflect on the development of the process. Flora and others *(1999, 7)* concur broadly with this depiction and state that successful communities focus on outcomes. They formulate a vision, decide what outputs they want to see, and transform it into actions to reach their goal. My contention is that reflection throughout the process can be efficient only if the process in question is properly recorded.

From my experience, practitioners in community development have a resistance to recording their work. Writing reports about their activities and administration of processes is time consuming and anything on paper may be seen as a threat to be questioned or criticized. The recording itself is in its own right a complex issue. People will have diverse observations and interpretations of the purpose and results of a community service or intervention. Bullen *(1996)* states that people do not always tell the truth. Generally, the record on a specific community process

reflects only the interpretation of one person. This interpretation is often left unchallenged by others involved in the same process, which poses an accuracy risk. Recording is an important prerequisite to assessment and measurement, especially in a specific community process or project. In this paper it is referred to as the first level of recording in community service. Recording on this level is an issue in its own right and deserves more attention than is given in this paper. However, it forms the basis of the second level of recording that is the issue here.

For the second level of recording it is suggested that community processes done by different units or service providers in one constituency, such as the departments of one institution or the organizations in one county or region, be recorded in a similar format. The format may be in a hard copy form, a card register, or information in an electronic database. At different universities, research showed that recording of community service in most cases merely consisted of a list of projects that included only the name of the project or the contact person. Only the people involved in the projects had first-level information on the focus of the process, eliminating any possibilities of generating collective information that constitutes second-level recording or auditing. The original information recorded on the first level is lengthy, and if one is dealing with large numbers, it may take hours to work through qualitative data on the projects. The balance to these extremes is a method that produces more than a list and less than the long reports inherent to first-level recording.

Information on the second level of recording is a powerful tool to detect fragmentation and overlapping of services and to be utilized as a basis to promote coordination and collaboration. Strategically it will observe inputs versus output and serve as basis data for managerial planning processes and policy formulation. The tool developed here standardizes and categorizes recording. The service provider registers the process or project in a format that forms part of a centralized information system. This enables a quick reference to the content of the individual process as well as processing the information to reflect collective data. In higher education institutions and other structures alike, it is suggested that information about community outputs be centralized as part of a management information system. How such a system works will become clearer in the discussion of the Stellenbosch experience.

Measuring Community Service

Measuring community service in an individual process is in itself a complicated issue. Measurement is associated with counting, and finding countable elements in the community development process is difficult. Even if one finds such elements, it is uncertain if the counts present the change that is intended. To create a context here, I draw from the work of Paul Bullen *(1999)*. He makes the following statement about measuring: "Management literature talks about tools like performance indicators, benchmarking, quality control, unit costing and cost-benefit analysis to name a few. The social sciences talk about tools like socio-economic indices, scales of attitudes and indicators of well being. Community service practice includes everything from 'stats' to goal attainment scaling."

> *"Recorded documents ensure continuity and are often recurrently used to reflect on the development of the process."*

Here Bullen compares the different types of processes in community services to manufacturing, administrative, service, human service, community development, and social change processes. There is a tendency to transfer management and evaluation tools from manufacturing to human services, and that can be done only if these tools are modified to adjust to the nature of human services. Different processes have different characteristics. Bullen discerns between two types of characteristics, namely X and Y. The X type will typically refer to human development processes where people are in the center of the development, giving it a fluid unpredictable façade. The Y type refers typically to manufacturing processes that are rigidly predictable. In processes with X characteristics similar to the community service referred to in this paper, measurement will be individualized in the majority of cases. Outcomes will be described after the fact rather than predicted. The individualized assessment of service will take place at the first level of recording as suggested earlier.

The work done by Flora and others *(1999, 20)* is an example of assessment that may be done with first-level recorded data. They developed types of outcomes that rural communities relate to success in community development, each with a set of indicators to support it. The actual process as it is happening is then

assessed according to the criteria. First-level recording and measurement is paramount to ascertain efficiency of individual processes and its outcomes. It is however not applicable to collective measurement of, for example, a group of communities. Community dynamics vary and differentiate, and one might end up comparing apples to pears if measurement is not standardized.

When it comes to community service outputs of service providers, measuring becomes an intricate problem and reflection consists of merely a description of what was done, without any indication of whether it made any difference to the expected outcomes of the recipient community. What can be considered here is developing a measuring or assessment tool that verifies whether service providers really provided the service they intended and determining indicators of success. This process implies that the management of an institution will develop a set of indicators as a benchmark for services to be rendered. Changes will have to be systemic and supported by a policy framework. Recent formulated policy requires academic departments at Stellenbosch to develop criteria by which the quality of their community service will be assessed.

"There is a tendency to transfer management and evaluation tools from manufacturing to human services, and that can be done only if these tools are modified. . . ."

As with individualized recording, the discussion in this paper about measuring aims only to illuminate relevant aspects and is not meant to be an in-depth investigation. The relevant question here is, can community service be measured collectively in a higher education institution setting? The university environment relies on counting and measuring tools to report back and account for its academic successes. The number of students that graduate and the quantity and category of research outputs is a typical example of such success rates. The collection of output data and collective reflection is common to the university environment. Measurement of success is simplified by its Y characteristics *(per Bullen 1999)*, as suggested earlier. My contention is that, apart from descriptive, categorized accumulative data, there are measurable elements in community service that can give an indication of the outputs by

the institution. The tool I am to present here shows how categorization can be used to profile and measure some of these outputs. However, it does not measure outcomes. To develop a tool for measuring outcomes, a suggested point of departure would be to record data that will describe performance, thus opening possibilities to performance indicators and second-level measurement.

Community Service at Stellenbosch University

Stellenbosch University responded to legislation with a strategic planning exercise. It culminated in a strategic framework *(University of Stellenbosch 2000)* in which the university promoted itself as a quality academic and research university and phrased its community commitment as a logically expected outcome of academic and research processes. An outcome of the strategic planning process was the establishment of a central unit, the University of Stellenbosch Service-Learning and Community-Interaction Unit.

The unit was mandated: "to strengthen community service as a visible, necessary university experience, and to facilitate mutually beneficial university-community partnerships" *(Daniels 2001)*. In answer to this mandate, it was suggested that Stellenbosch position itself to take a direction to integrate community service into the curriculum, focusing on the students' development as the primary client of the institution. Stellenbosch sought to embrace the pedagogy of service-learning, treating community service as a systemic change agent with mutually beneficial partnerships between communities and university.

As a vehicle of the university, the unit was faced with the challenge of initiating a transformation process to establish community service as a changing agent of both community and university. It entailed both attitudinal changes in students and staff and structural changes in coordination and collaborative systems. Meeting this challenge in pulling all the loose ends together required reliable information about the prevailing community service activities in the institution. In the absence of this prerequisite, an audit was conducted to record all the community service activities on campus using the electronic medium to collect the data. This was done to establish a database of information about community service projects and to determine how community service is practiced, specifically focusing on if and how academics perceive community service as an integral part of the core functions of teaching and research.

Recording community service at Stellenbosch: The Stellenbosch recording process was preceded by an informal survey of the type of projects that were active on campus. It was found that participating departments were aware of other initiatives, but only a few engaged in collaborative partnerships. Recording of community projects was done in proposal or report format that resembles the first-level recording referred to earlier. Information and experiences were rarely shared and thus were inaccessible to the rest of the university community. Some departments were not keen on distributing their documentation to others for various reasons. The majority, however, indicated that they would like information on the work of other departments. They were also prepared to release limited information on their own projects to be accessed by other service providers. The design of the questionnaire therefore had to meet these requirements and the following process was followed:

Designing the questionnaire: The first questionnaire was tested with initiatives from ten different departments. Based on their inputs, the audit rested on the following premises:

- ❑ Data are collected in a uniform electronic format and stored in a central database accessible to all other service providers.
- ❑ Processed data reflect a profile of each individual initiative that gives enough information for other service providers to identify similarities to their work. It is not meant to be a full case study.
- ❑ The questionnaire contains a choice of descriptive categories for the most important components of a community service process. These are indexed to enable other services providers to track their services.
- ❑ The categories are all connected to explanatory pop-up windows to rule out confusion about their meaning.
- ❑ The database contains the necessary management information for decision makers to structure services to be beneficial to all parties involved.
- ❑ The data provide limited statistics on aspects such as financial spending and human resources utilization.

Outline of the questionnaire: The questionnaire consists of the following sections and data fields.

Identification data: Name of project, faculty, department, contact person details.

- ❑ The name of the project is open-ended and describes the project in the respondents' own words.
- ❑ A Web-based form displays identification details automatically when the respondent types in a staff number.

Context of project: Type of community service and relation to curriculum, human resources involved.

- ❑ The type of community service is described by categories on a pull-down menu: *Community service (non-curricular), Community service (curricular), Short courses, and Contract research*. (Feedback to the South African Education Department about community service outputs is based on these categories.)
- ❑ Human resources categories indicate the numbers and positions of staff and students involved in the project and hours per week spent on the project.

Target community: Sector in community, partners in community, target groups.

- ❑ Sector categories: *Economy, Health, Education, Agriculture, Local/Central government, Culture, and Religion.*
- ❑ Respondent names or describes partner in the community.
- ❑ Target groups are described in own words (e.g., mothers with infants) and categorized into *Adults*, *Children* and *Both groups*.

Description of process: Aim, goals, functions, type of development, impact, co-ordination patterns, collaboration patterns.

- ❑ Respondents are requested to phrase the ultimate aim in one sentence.
- ❑ Goals are to be formulated in not more than five sentences.
- ❑ Functions are categorized into *Facilitation, Consultation, Advice, Direct services, Training, Co-ordination, and Collecting and processing data.*

- Categories of type of development are: *Human development, Organization development, Infrastructure development, and Technological development.*
- The impact of the development is indicated with categories *Preventative, Therapeutic, Progressive, and Capacity building.*
- Respondents indicate coordination and collaboration patterns by choosing from a list the department with whom they work together or coordinate.

Fiscal implications: Source of funding, amounts.

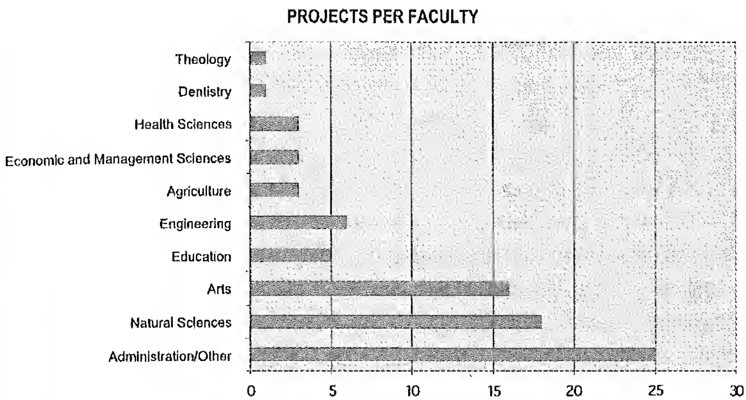
- Donors of funding are named and categorized into: *Own budget, Government funding, Corporate funding, Overseas funding, and Payment for services*
- Amounts are stated in rands (South African currency) to the nearest thousand.

Each of the categories, when selected, activates a pop-up help window with a description of what is meant by that particular category.

Methodology: The audit process was restricted to the projects that are managed from within the institution. The respondents were the persons in faculties and departments who had the best knowledge of the project to be reported on. The process was sanctioned and promoted by the top management of the institution by urging deans of faculties to encourage responses. The audit was appropriately advertised in campus media and the questionnaire was easily accessible from the university home page. Each completed questionnaire's data was sent automatically to an electronic database where it was processed and disseminated.

Audit findings: The first finding is that *information can be utilized as a management information system.* The collected data were processed to give project counts in each standardized category; for example Graph 2 depicts the number of projects in each faculty. Similar graphs and pie charts were done on the other categories outlined in the questionnaire, subsequently illuminating the tendencies supported by actual percentages. In this audit, it was found that most of the projects were active in the education sector, focused on human development of an empowering nature by

GRAPH 2: PROJECTS PER FACULTY



offering training of some sort. As a management tool, it provided, among others, information on how many initiatives are running in the institution, in which departments they are located, how many staff and students are involved, how many projects are academically related, and what was the fiscal turnover for a particular year. The management information may be applied as follows:

- Community service sites and content may be traced. It is possible to determine what is being done where and by whom and update it on an annual basis.
- Non-participative sites are identified by illuminating the active ones. This indicates where community service should be promoted.
- Reflection on type of services offered may be matched with community needs.
- Duplication and fragmentation may be eliminated if information is shared.
- Distribution and allocation of resources can be revisited according to institutional priorities. It offers a rethinking of the financial investment that is made into one single problem area, while others suffer coping with limited budgets.
- Cumulative information is processed to reflect positively on the corporate image of the institution and the results attained. The possibilities for presentation, such as for grants, are endless.

In this instance, the information was utilized to inform a restructuring of community service process at Stellenbosch University.

The second finding is that the *information serves as a catalyst to promote coordination and collaboration between role-players in the institution* operating in the same field, resulting in a positive impact on the recipient communities.

The data collected with the questionnaire reflect a profile of an individual community service project or activity. All the data on one single project are organized into a report format that is accessible to other service providers in the institution. The open-ended questions give additional qualitative data to support the categories, giving a compact but sufficient description of the project to other service providers. In the absence of Web access, a hard copy register with cross-reference indexes may be used as a substitute. Individual profiling of projects may serve the following purposes:

- Accessibility of the information to all the role-players, creating the opportunity to track processes similar to their own by comparing information on the description of the process. For example, if academics integrate community service in their modules, they can link up with others by using the community service (curricular) lookup.
- Mutual showcasing of models and experience may serve a motivational purpose, and new learning sites may be explored.
- Sharing their community service activities can also become a powerful instrument for academics to affirm community-based research and introduce educational models to integrate community service in the curriculum.
- Without threatening their autonomy, service providers are enabled to coordinate and collaborate better. In Stellenbosch, the service providers of outreach programs in schools deliberated to find more efficient methodologies and promote coordination and collaboration between themselves.
- Scarce resources that are underutilized because services are rendered in isolation can be maximized by partnerships. In poor communities, multifaceted problems call for multifaceted services. For example, it does not make sense to treat people for tuberculosis if they do not have food to eat, because the medication has adverse effects on an empty

stomach. Different faculties will be able to link their services to create a comprehensive service chain that addresses all related problems in one community. Currently it is evident that singular services are rendered in different communities without the support of services that could complement the impact.

In strong relation to the first finding, the third finding is that *certain aspects of community service are measurable with this method of recording.*

- Analyzing the data numerically produces figures on all the categories and reflects which characteristics are dominant. Areas of expertise are illuminated and may be expanded if necessary, and neglected areas can be improved.
- Statistics on the distribution of resources as human input and financial expenditure may be processed as marketable information to improve the sociopolitical image of the institution.

Measuring the quality and outcome of services is still an unexplored phase in this process. When and if the collaborative partnerships between departments are established, an inclusive participatory process may be initiated to develop indicators for measuring services.

Conclusion

The conclusion drawn from the audit is that community service is recorded and measured on an individual basis in the majority of contexts that were investigated. Second-level recording as described here is underdeveloped or nonexistent. Higher education institutions that face the dilemma of lack of meaningful recording of community service outputs will gain valuable information from the Stellenbosch experience, while researchers in the field of project management and service-learning will gain insight on how to link their projects and programs to others in the same field. Other managerial systems similar to what has been described in this paper can develop similar processes for their own context. The content will vary according to the setting in which it will be utilized. Higher education institutions that have done similar research are invited to share their experience, thus enhancing debate on possible models of auditing, recording, and measuring and managing community service.

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